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STARTUP BASICS

Grandma Inventor Perseveres--and Wins

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By: [Bonnie Price](#) | 01/18/2010

Passion and persistence are the hallmarks of great entrepreneurs, and these qualities are available to all of us no matter our age.

Louise Stoll was 59 when she went to the airport in 1999 to pick up her daughter. When Louise saw her daughter Miriam waddling off the plane seven months pregnant, a toddler on her hip, a diaper bag over one shoulder and carrying a 20-pound car seat, she knew there had to be a better way.

So Louise sketched a belt and buckle restraint that she thought would work on a plane in place of a car seat. Her journey had begun.

Stoll had been an assistant secretary of transportation in the Clinton administration, so she was no stranger to the inner workings of the federal government. And she knew how to conduct research, having earned a doctorate in public policy and [finance](#) several years earlier. But she had no idea of the twists and turns ahead of her in bringing CARES (Child Aviation REstraint System) to market successfully.

In early 2000, Louise met with a patent attorney. Months later, informed that her concept could probably be patented, she gave him approval to file with the U.S. Patent Office. More than 18 months later, after learning that the patent was pending, she left her job and devoted herself full-time to bringing her concept to market.

Louise had identified the steps that needed to happen:

- Guide the product through all the certifications.
- Make the prototypes.
- Find a manufacturer.
- Find a distributor with ties to child safety and/or the [airline](#) industry.

She started with child-safety companies, thinking they were already familiar with the necessary steps and certifications. Her first major lesson was that requirements for highway safety and airline safety go through two completely different areas of the government, and the certification process is different. The child-safety companies didn't have the necessary background and experience for her product.

She shifted her attention to the airline industry and researched companies that provide restraints for passengers, pilots, flight attendants and cargo. In each case, these were "cold calls" by a woman with no experience in the industry. She hit pay dirt on the second airline supplier call. She managed to speak with the company president, who was interested in her idea and willing to sign a confidentiality agreement. He invited her to Phoenix to meet with him and his staff. They liked what they saw and set up an appointment with a major airline. By the end of 2002, the patent had been issued. Stoll signed a licensing agreement with AmSafe to make a prototype and do in-house testing. If the tests were successful, AmSafe would handle the FAA certification.

FAA certification took from early 2003 until late 2006. The certification wasn't centered on whether the product would work; that was clear from the testing. It was focused on the effect of the product on the airline seat, and the safety and convenience of other passengers. The time frame was determined by how busy each person was at the many, many desks the certification process had to go through. Although frustrated by how long it took, Stoll was impressed by the dedication and seriousness of the people at the FAA.

Near the end of the certification process, notices were placed in the Federal Register, which allows anyone from the public to comment. Every comment is read and answered in writing. This process initially took several months. A change in the wording at the last moment allowing individuals as well as airlines to purchase CARES required re-posting the notice in the Federal Register--and nearly another year.

On Sept. 7, 2006, the FAA issued a press release announcing CARES and certified it for all phases of flight in all types of aircraft. Stoll's website went live the same day, and *Today* aired a segment on CARES the same day!

For the first 18 months, CARES was sold only through the website, KidsFlySafe.com.

In early 2008, CARES became available in retail stores, and by late 2008 it was also available in a dozen foreign countries. CARES has been certified by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK and flies on most of the major airlines of Europe and Asia.

To date, the airlines have declined to provide CARES due to the cost, which is about \$250 per airliner.

Lessons learned:

- Working with the federal government takes much longer than expected.
- Finding the right partner/consultant/professional is critical. Don't stop looking until all your criteria are met, and you feel comfortable.
- Don't quit just because it seems to be taking a long time.

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